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## **Pokanoket: the First People of the East Bay, Bristol, Rhode Island**

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BRISTOL, RHODE ISLAND

# POKANOKET: THE FIRST PEOPLE OF THE EAST BAY



WRITTEN BY STUDENTS OF ROGER WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY





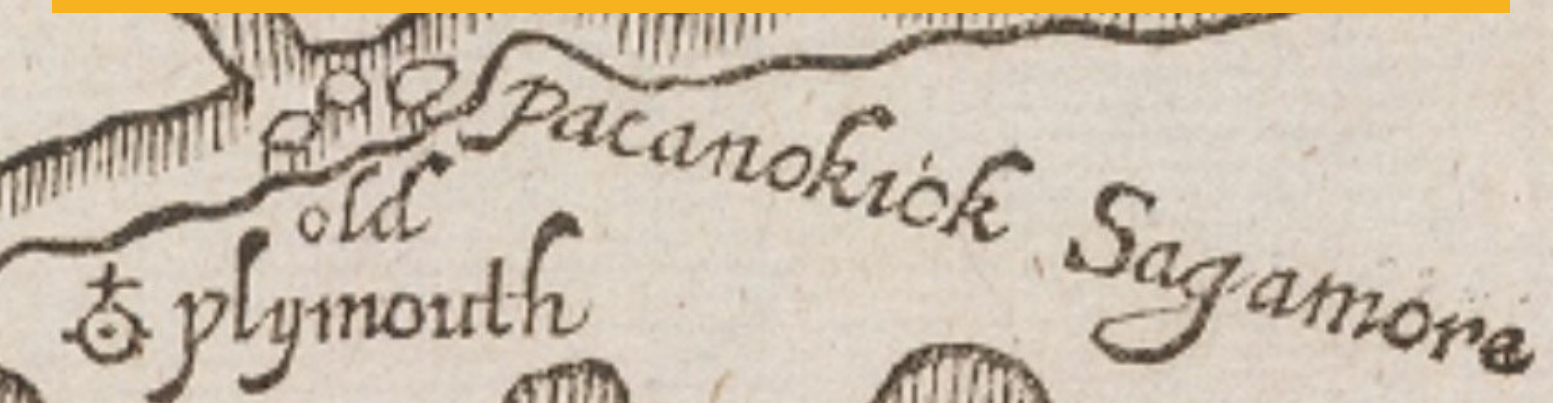
# THE NATION THAT WELCOMED THE PILGRIMS MAINTAINS ITS CONNECTION TO THESE LANDS.

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The Pokanoket (anglicized from “Pauquunaukit,” meaning “land at the clearing”) are the First People of the land of Sowams, better known today as the towns of Bristol, Warren, Barrington, and East Providence in the state of Rhode Island. The Pokanoket have played a prominent role in the Indigenous and colonial history of these lands. At the time of the first contact with Europeans, the Pokanoket were the headship tribe of a Nation to which more than 60 tribes, bands, and clans throughout New England held tribute and gave allegiance. Under the inherited leadership of the Massasoit, or “great leader,” Massasoit Ousamequin, the Pokanoket welcomed the English at Plymouth. However, after devastating epidemics weakened their Nation, the Pokanoket were forced from their lands by encroachment and war. Enslavement and exile followed, through centuries of official and unofficial persecution.

Nevertheless, the Pokanoket have survived through four centuries of colonial occupation and are currently thriving. They openly share the richness of their culture and heritage with non-Indigenous neighbors and welcome the support and engagement of the broader community. The Pokanoket also seek to restore free access to their most sacred site, Potumtuk (also known as Mt. Hope), the location of the Brown University Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology. Decolonization is an important step towards equity and justice in Rhode Island, and in this spirit, the Pokanoket proudly declare that they are here and they are now.

*Image: Detail showing “Pocanokick Sagamore” at present-day Bristol, RI, from William Wood’s map “The South Part of New England, as it is Planted this year 1634.”*





# THE FIRST PEOPLE

Algonquian-speaking peoples like the Pokanoket, the Narragansett, and the tribes that would later be called Wampanoag (meaning “easterner”) have lived in what is now Rhode Island for at least 12,000 years. From **Potumtuk** or Mt. Hope, the Pokanoket Massasoits presided over a loose confederation with vast geographical reach (the term “Massasoit” is an inherited title for great leader). With the onset of European exploration, Verrazano described the people of the geographical location of Mt. Hope Bay, and the Pokanoket were noted in the maps of early cartographers such as William Wood and John Seller. With his nation weakened by early exposure to foreign diseases, the Massasoit Ousamequin deliberated the fate of the first English settlers who landed at Plymouth in 1620. From Sowams, in council with his sagamores, sachems, and powwas, Ousamequin decided to enter a treaty with the English.

*Below: Both “Pokanaket” and “King Philhps Country” are clearly visible on John Seller’s 1675 “Mapp of New England.”*







# PEACE WITH THE PILGRIMS

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The Pokanoket Massasoit **Ousamequin** saw that the new settlers were struggling, and decided to help them acclimate to the land. Following their first contact, the two groups negotiated a mutual defense agreement in 1621, and the relationship between them grew stronger. In the winter of 1636, the Massasoit Ousamequin welcomed Roger Williams to Pokanoket lands and granted permission for him to settle. However, as the English population continued to grow in Plymouth and Massachusetts Colonies, the Pokanoket and other Indigenous nations came under increasing pressure. When the Massasoit Ousamequin passed away in 1661, his son Wamsutta inherited the mantle of leadership but soon died, most likely as a result of being poisoned. Massasoit Ousamequin's second son **Metacom**, known to the English as King Philip, inherited the headship of the Pokanoket nation in 1662, as the clouds of war gathered.



**Statue of the Massasoit Ousamequin by Cyrus Edwin Dallin, Plymouth MA (1920).**



# WAR, EXILE, AND SLAVERY

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During Ousamequin's time as Massasoit, illness swept through Indigenous nations in a cataclysm that came to be known as The Great Dying. Settlers took advantage to expand their landholdings. While peace had held for 54 years, in 1675 war broke out in New England. The so-called **King Philip's War** pitted a pan-Indigenous alliance against the united colonies and had the highest per-capita casualty rate of all wars in American history. Dozens of colonial settlements were burned, including Providence and Warwick. Throughout the war, Metacom's home base remained Sowams, and it was here at Potumtuk that he was assassinated and beheaded in August of 1676. As a warning to other native peoples, settlers at Plymouth hoisted Metacom's head on a pike on the outskirts of the town, where it stood for twenty-five years.

After the war, some of the Pokanoket were relocated to the **Shetucket Reservation** in eastern Connecticut (under the oversight of Rev. James Fitch), where they continued to have their own sachem and social structure led in part by the war captain Pawbewonckenuck and Metacom's sister Mattasquae. Another group of refugees, known as the "**Anawan Captives**," fled to a rural area of Rehoboth (now Seekonk, MA), and settled there. Captured survivors, including Metacom's wife Wootonekanuske and his son Metom, were sold into slavery in Bermuda, while others were sold as far away as the Azores and the Caribbean. Those who identified as Pokanoket did not reveal their identity due to a colonial law that authorized any Pokanoket over 14 years of age to be killed on sight. As with other Indigenous New Englanders after the war, the Pokanoket did what they could to survive.

*Image: A romanticized depiction of Metacom, in front of Potumtuk or Mt. Hope, from a 19th-century engraving by Benson John Lossing.*





# THE INVISIBLE TRIBE

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The period of the 18th through the early 20th Century bears rich historical importance for the Pokanoket Nation. Contemporary Pokanoket people recall that during this long stretch of history they were largely “an invisible tribe,” due to their fears of identifying as Pokanoket in the aftermath of King Philip’s War and due to being forced to adopt the name Wampanoag by the dominant society. Sowams, which the Pokanoket never surrendered nor sold, was simply taken by a consortium of Boston land grabbers in 1680. In the 1700s, Pokanokets in Connecticut and Seekonk did what they could to survive, including collaborating with other communities and welcoming back Metom from slavery, who returned to find his people.

Later, **Simeon Simons** (1759-1835), a direct descendant of Metacom and resident of Pachaug, CT, was born into a world where his cultural identity had been stripped by colonists. Despite this, Simons would rise to become the trusted lieutenant and bodyguard to General George Washington at Valley Forge, the crossing of the Delaware, and throughout the Revolutionary War. Considering that the Pokanoket name had been outlawed, Simeon Simons never revealed his true Pokanoket identity. Simons’s portrait can be found in the Griswold (CT) Town Hall, and a depiction of him riding horseback side-by-side with George Washington appears on the town’s bicentennial coin.



**Portrait of Simeon Simons with George Washington, Griswold CT.**



# INDIGENOUS RESURGENCE IN RHODE ISLAND

George F. Weeden was born in 1838 and was married to Simeon's granddaughter Susan Simons; both were descendants of the royal line of Pokanoket leadership and their children made crucial contributions to the Indigenous civil rights movement in the early 20th Century. In 1923, their son Frederick Weeden was among the founders of the **National Algonquin Indian Council** and served as the first treasurer of the organization. Especially active in southern New England, the NAIC advocated for the awareness of the existence of native peoples in the broader society. Victims of prejudice and marginalization, many Pokanoket families were listed as "colored," "black," "white," or "mulatto" on census rolls, and still recalled the violent erasure of the Pokanoket legal identity from centuries before.

Perhaps the most famous modern descendent of the Pokanoket royal line was **Princess Red Wing of the Seven Crescents**, born Mary Glasko in Sprague, CT, in 1896. Her life and work embody great historical significance for the Pokanoket and Narragansett nations, as she was a strong advocate for the visibility of New England tribes. Founder of the Tomaquag Indian Memorial Museum, Princess Red Wing was also inducted into the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame, received an honorary doctorate from the University of Rhode Island, and in 1946 she became the first Native American to address the United Nations.



**Founding Meeting of the National Algonquin Indians Council in Providence, RI in 1923. Image courtesy of the University of Illinois Archives.**



**Princess Red Wing, noted Indigenous leader in Rhode Island (ca. 1960).**





# THE POKANOKET TODAY



The Pokanoket Tribe currently has **300+ recognized members** in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. The current leaders of the Pokanoket Tribe/Pokanoket Nation are the Sagamore Po Wauipi Neimpaug (“Winds of Thunder”), the nine-times great-grandson of Metacom, and the Sachem Po Pummukaonk Anoggs (“Dancing Star”), his ten-times great-granddaughter. All Pokanoket Tribal Council members and Sachems are also direct descendants of the Massasoit Ousamequin and his siblings. They have been active in the community since the early 1990s, and aim to bring a strong sense of pride back to the Pokanoket people.

The Pokanoket are not a federally recognized tribe nor do they seek to be, and yet they are a vibrant and vital part of the East Bay community. In the summer, the Pokanoket are a visible presence at Mt. Hope Farm's “**Camp Wetu**” (below), teaching area children about their culture and history. Members have also visited schools, churches, city halls, and regional powwows to share their traditions. Spreading knowledge of the true spirit of this community is important in establishing the reasons why the Pokanoket are seeking to reclaim Potumtuk. They do not seek to build casinos, nor do the Pokanoket have any interest in lands that are not historically, traditionally, or religiously Pokanoket.



# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POTUMTUK (MT. HOPE IN BRISTOL, RI)



**Walk of the Pineese  
Ceremony at Potumtuk**



**2019 Renewal of the Covenant  
ceremony led by the Sagamore**

As a thriving community, the Pokanoket rely on their ancestral lands to sustain their unique way of life. One of those areas is Potumtuk, otherwise known as Mount Hope. In 1955, the industrialist and philanthropist Rudolph L. Haffenreffer donated 376 acres of Pokanoket land that comprises Potumtuk to Brown University, and in recent years the Pokanoket have been negotiating with the University to reclaim their ancestral spiritual grounds.

In their native language, “Potumtuk” translates to “lookout of the Pokanoket.” This location is central to Pokanoket history, culture, and spirituality. It is the location of Metacom’s Seat (King Phillip’s Chair), from which generations of leaders presided. The seat of granite and quartz was “made by the Creator,” and demonstrates the value of connecting to nature and the sacredness that each living and non-living being has. Many important meetings and gatherings were, and continue to be, located here. These ancestral grounds hold religious value as many Pokanoket rituals and ceremonies commence here including the Walk of Pineese Warriors, the Renewal of the Covenant, as well as various forms of communal prayers and thanksgivings. Out of 13 lunar thanksgivings that the Pokanoket celebrate, 4 are held at Potumtuk.





**Sagamore Winds of Thunder sits in the Seat of Metacom at Potumtuk, 2019.**

At the root of Pokanoket beliefs is the connection that humans have to the environment. Their forefathers believed that humans are to utilize and at the same time respect the creations of the Earth without being wasteful or greedy. This value is still held dearly by the Pokanoket people today. The Pokanoket are connected to the land, and as they walk the lands of Potumtuk they walk in the footsteps of their ancestors, creating a connection to their heritage. From the Three Sisters of corn, beans, and squash that provide nourishment from the garden to the eagle and wild deer, the Pokanoket are connected to their relatives through the Earth and all of its creations. The vivid stories that nature provides for the Pokanoket are integral to their spirituality.

Potumtuk is one of three sacred mountains for the Pokanoket Nation. In the recent past, the area has been heavily damaged due to the installation of an amusement park, military equipment, a museum, and private homes. It has been very difficult for the Pokanoket to access the sacred land to which they have had an unbroken connection for at least 10,000 years. Denying the Pokanoket access to their land is denying them access to their identity, to their history, and to the continued vitality of their community.



# WHAT IS DECOLONIZATION?

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Colonization is the process of exerting complete control over the Indigenous people of a particular area by attempting to erase the culture, language, and histories of the land and its people. In the United States, settler colonialism has been predicated on the physical and cultural erasure of Indigenous peoples.

By contrast, decolonization is a process that seeks to undo the ongoing effects of colonialism, both on our physical environments but just as importantly on our understandings of history and culture. Decolonization calls for individuals to use different methods to achieve this goal, such as: caring for the land so as to restore sacred connections; challenging public stories, such as racist or outmoded thinking about Indigenous peoples; and reversing the dispossession of lands by recognizing native title. It is necessary for decolonization to occur, specifically for the Pokanoket nation, because it seeks to restore the histories and traditions of the Pokanoket that colonizers have long attempted to erase.

*Below: Protests supporting the Pokanoket claim to Potumtuk, Providence RI, in 2017 and 2019.*





# FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE POKANOKET

## Scholarly Resources:

- *New Light on the Old Colony*, by Jeremy D. Bangs (Brill, 2019).
- *Burr's Hill: A 17th Century Wampanoag Burial Ground in Warren, RI*, edited by Susan G. Gibson (Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, 1980).
- *Finding Balance: The Genealogy of Massasoit's People and the Oral and Written History of the Seaconke Pokanoket Wampanoag Tribal Nation*, by Deborah Spears Moorehead (Blue Hand Books, 2014).
- *Mayflower: Voyage, Community, War*, by Nathaniel Philbrick (Penguin, 2007).
- "Massasoit's Domain: Is 'Wampanoag' the Correct Designation?" by Warner F. Gookin (*Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archeological Society* 20:1, 1958).
- *Memory Lands: King Philip's War and the Place of Violence in the Northeast*, by Christine M. DeLucia (Yale University Press, 2018).
- *Manitou and Providence*, by Neal Salisbury (Oxford University Press, 1984).
- *Monumental Mobility: The Memory Work of Massasoit*, by Lisa Blee and Jean O'Brien (University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

## ON THE WEB

Pokanoket Tribe of the Pokanoket Nation Official Website:

[pokanokettribe.com](http://pokanokettribe.com)

Sowams Heritage Area Project: [sowamsheritagearea.org](http://sowamsheritagearea.org)

PoMetacom Camp at Mt. Hope (2017):

[pometacomcampblog.wordpress.com](http://pometacomcampblog.wordpress.com)

Interactive Native Lands Map: [native-land.ca](http://native-land.ca)

Visit us online to learn more.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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